

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
White River Field Office  
220 E Market St  
Meeker, CO 81641**

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)**

***Travel and Transportation Management  
Resource Management Plan Amendment for the WRFO  
DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2016-0044-EA***

### **Background**

#### **Alternative A**

Under Alternative A (No Action Alternative), the BLM would not further amend any of the travel management decisions in the 1997 RMP prior to beginning implementation planning. Existing travel management decisions include those associated with the Pike Ridge and Buford closures (Federal Register Volume 59, Number 247), 2004 Wilson Creek Transportation Plan Amendment, 2015 Oil and Gas Development RMP Amendment, and the 2015 Northwest Colorado Greater Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment (refer to Appendix A of the environmental assessment (EA) for specific decision language from the RMP).

Under Alternative A, the six Wilderness Study Areas, Moosehead Mountain, Oak Ridge State Wildlife Area (SWA), and Pike Ridge are closed to motorized travel. Most of the rest of the field office is limited to existing routes (either year-round or seasonally) with most of the ACECs (except for East Douglas Creek ACEC) and Canyon Pintado National Historic District being limited to designated routes. Timber Gulch/Hay Gulch and Cow Creek are seasonally closed from 8/15 to 11/30 to provide for non-motorized hunting opportunities.

Alternative A allows for hunters to use motorized vehicles off-route (any distance) to retrieve downed big game and the general public to use motorized vehicles to travel up to 300 ft from an existing route to park, camp, or gather firewood so long as no damage to resources is caused. Alternative A also allows for physically challenged individuals (with a CPW permit) to travel off-route.

Under Alternative A, the Wilderness Study Areas, Oak Ridge SWA, and Moosehead Mountain are closed to snowmobiles. There are no other restrictions for motorized over the snow travel in the rest of the field office.

Alternative A is the only alternative where the BLM would identify (map) areas within the field office needing improved public access. Route density is also included in Alternative A to guide future implementation decisions.

### **Alternative B**

Rather than allowing travel on any existing route, Alternative B would limit travel (outside of closed and open areas) to designated routes. Alternative B would retain the closed areas in the 1997 RMP (Alternative A) while also adding lands with wilderness characteristics areas, the Indian Valley and Anderson Gulch parcels, the proposed Big Ridge backcountry conservation area, and three riparian parcels within the White River ACEC, and parcels adjacent to closed “roadless” areas on the White River National Forest. However, under Alternative B, the Moosehead Mountain closed area would be modified to allow for camping on the west side near Harpers Corner Road.

Alternative B proposes four open areas close to towns in the Planning Area, including LO7 Hill, the Rangely Rock Crawling Park (rock slabs), North Rangely, and North Dinosaur.

Alternative B reduces exceptions for off-route travel (to one vehicle length) for dispersed camping, firewood gathering, harvesting Christmas trees, and game retrieval. Alternative B would also eliminate exceptions for physically challenged individuals to be consistent with BLM policy.

For motorized over the snow travel, Alternative B would expand the closed areas so that areas that are closed for motorized travel are also closed to motorized over the snow travel. Greater sage-grouse priority habitat and big game severe winter range and winter concentration areas would be limited to designated routes. In the rest of the field office, motorized over the snow travel would be permitted off of designated routes so long as there was at least 18 inches of snow cover.

Wilderness Study Areas would be closed to mechanized travel (including game carts). Within the rest of the field office, mechanized travel would be limited to designated routes but game carts could be used off-route.

### **Alternative C**

Alternative C is similar to Alternative B in that travel outside of closed and open areas would be limited to designated routes. Rather than being closed to motorized travel, BLM land associated with the Oak Ridge SWA, Pike Ridge, Indian Valley, Anderson Gulch, the Big Ridge proposed backcountry conservation area, and the Olive Garden parcel in the White River Riparian ACEC would be limited to designated routes. Lands with wilderness characteristics areas would be limited to primitive routes. Under Alternative C, the Moosehead Mountain closed area would be further modified to allow for camping on both the west side near Harpers Corner Road as well as two other locations on the route to the Turner Creek pond.

Seasonal limitations (area closures) would restrict travel from October 1 to April 30 in specified big game winter habitat areas and from March 1 to July 15 in specified sage-grouse breeding and nesting areas.

Alternative C proposes four open areas in the same places as Alternative B. Under Alternative C, the proposed open areas at LO7 Hill, North Rangely, and North Dinosaur would be larger than under Alternative B. Within the Rangely Rock Crawling Park, the proposed open areas (rock slabs) are the same under Alternatives B and C.

Travel up to 100 ft off-route would be permitted for dispersed camping, firewood gathering, harvesting Christmas trees, and game retrieval.

Similar to Alternative B, Alternative C would manage motorized over the snow travel so that the areas that are closed for motorized travel are also closed to motorized over the snow travel. Greater sage-grouse priority habitat and big game severe winter range (but not winter concentration areas) would be limited to designated routes. In the rest of the field office, motorized over the snow travel would be permitted off of designated routes so long as there was at least 18 inches of snow cover.

Mechanized travel would be managed the same as in Alternative B, however the seasonal limitations for big game and sage-grouse would apply to mechanized travel as well as to motorized travel. Alternative C includes route density for primitive and designated routes for both mechanized and motorized travel.

#### **Alternative D**

Alternative D is similar to Alternatives B and C in that travel outside of closed and open areas would be limited to designated routes. Continuing current management (Alternative A), the WSAs and the BLM land associated with Oak Ridge SWA would remain closed to motorized travel. The Moosehead Mountain closed area would be modified to allow for camping in three locations: on the west side near Harpers Corner Road, on the south side at the existing gate (but not as far as to Turner Creek Pond as in Alternative C), and on the north side. Similar to Alternative B, Alternative D also proposes for Indian Valley, Anderson Gulch, parcels along the White River ACEC (Beefsteak, Olive Garden, and Hardaway), and parcels adjacent to closed, roadless areas on the White River National Forest to be closed to motorized vehicles.

Depending on the unit, lands with wilderness characteristics would either be managed as closed, limited to designated routes, limited to primitive routes, or limited to designated or primitive routes.

Alternative D proposes four open areas in the same places as Alternatives B and C. The LO7 Hill and North Dinosaur open areas would be larger than Alternative B and smaller than Alternative C. The North Rangely open area would be slightly smaller than Alternative B. Within the Rangely Rock Crawling Park, the proposed open areas (rock slabs) would be similar to Alternatives B and C except for Little Moab.

Within limited areas, travel off-route would only be permitted to allow vehicles to park off of routes for safety (pull off of routes for the minimize clearance to allow another vehicle to pass when driving or parking). The BLM would not allow motorized travel off of designated routes for activities such as dispersed camping, firewood gathering, harvesting Christmas trees, and game retrieval.

Similar to Alternatives B and C, Alternative D would manage motorized over the snow travel so that the areas that are closed for motorized travel are also closed to motorized over the snow travel. Big game severe winter range and winter concentration areas would be limited to designated routes. In the rest of the field office, motorized over the snow travel would be permitted off of designated routes so long as there was at least 18 inches of snow cover.

Mechanized travel would be managed similar to Alternatives B and C, except that the Moosehead, Oak Ridge, and riparian area closures would also apply to mechanized travel.

Similar to Alternatives A and C, the BLM would use route density as designation criteria during subsequent implementation planning. However, application of route density in Alternative D would be less prescriptive than in Alternative C and acknowledges that route-by-route designations across a Travel Management Plan are expected to be more measured and judicious to emphasize equitable consideration of management objectives established for each resource.

The BLM's Preferred Alternative is Alternative D.

### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

Based upon a review of the EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that Alternative D would not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity, as defined at 40 CFR 1508.27 and do not exceed those effects as described in the White River Resource Area Proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) (1996). Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described below.

#### **Context**

The White River Field Office (WRFO) boundary includes approximately 2.7 million acres of BLM, National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Forest Service (FS), state, and private lands located in northwestern Colorado. Within this area, the BLM administers approximately 1.5 million surface acres and 2.2 million acres of federal oil and gas minerals (subsurface) estate. The Planning Area for this planning effort includes only the 1.5 million surface acres; management decisions made as a result of this planning process would apply only to BLM-administered surface acres and would not apply to State Highways or County Roads.

## ***Intensity***

The following discussion is organized around the 10 Significance Criteria described at 40 CFR 1508.27. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this Proposed Action:

### **1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.**

Overall, Alternative D would have a variety of incremental changes to recreational access and settings across the landscape as implemented, monitored, and enforced over the years. However, the vast majority of this landscape would provide similar settings and opportunities as currently exists in those areas. The open areas and closed areas would provide more certainty for recreationalists that those settings and opportunities would be retained over time. Future route-by-route travel management plans would have the most influence on changing recreational settings and reducing impacts of travel to other resources.

Under Alternative D, the boundary of the Moosehead Mountain closed area would be modified to provide opportunities for motorized camping adjacent to this area while protecting the non-motorized setting and high quality hunting opportunities currently found in this area.

The proposed open areas (167 acres) consist of providing four open areas that provide a variety of off-highway vehicle (OHV) riding opportunities near communities with boundaries that are either defined by topography or roads, or that can be defined with additional signage or fencing. Although in the North Dinosaur open area there would be the potential for increased erosion (due to loss of biological soil crust) which could expose and damage subsurface cultural sites, Alternative D provides a balance of providing high quality OHV riding opportunities and minimizing impacts to other resources.

There are eight proposed closed areas (total of 76,656 acres or ~5 percent of the planning area) in lands with wilderness characteristics units. Overall, Alternative D provides relatively similar motorized access to BLM lands, compared to what currently exists, while providing long-term assurance that the closed areas would continue to retain the existing wilderness characteristics found in those areas. These areas would provide non-motorized primitive recreational settings and outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreational activities such as big game hunting, hiking, backpacking, and horseback riding. There would be a total of approximately 56 miles of primitive routes closed to motor vehicles under this alternative (approximately 1 percent of BLM routes within the planning area). Most of these travel routes that would be closed to motor vehicles do not currently have public access and several routes that do have public access are not in a current condition that allows passage of motor vehicles). None of the closed primitive routes would connect to other BLM travel routes so there would be no loss in connectivity across the landscape with the current transportation network. Therefore, this would minimally impact those seeking the same amount of motorized access in these areas. These boundaries would also be cost effective to implement and easily recognizable on-the-ground for recreationalists.

Application of route density in Alternative D would be less prescriptive than in Alternative C and route-by-route designations are expected to be more measured and judicious to emphasize

equitable consideration of management objectives established for each resource. More traditional area-specific travel management strategies (e.g., seasonal or permanent closures) applied to the existing motorized travel network would reduce impairment of seasonal ranges but not as substantially as management of route density. It is likely that route density management has the potential to prompt important positive changes in the inherent utility of big game habitats in the Planning Area. Over time, these changes would be expected to contribute measurably to: improving the distribution and availability of big game on public lands in the long term; supporting the inherent capacity of each big game population to achieve its potential for survival, productivity and recruitment; and improving the efficacy of habitat enhancement measures by reducing behavioral constraints on the efficiency and frequency of use.

**2. The degree to which the Proposed Action affects public health or safety.**

The proposed changes to the travel management decisions in the RMP would not affect public health or safety. The North Rangely open area is located within the Weber Sand Unit, which is an active oil and gas field, whose production contains hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) gas. The open area would not have active oil and gas operations within the boundaries; however, there are five active oil and gas facilities around the proposed open area. A review of Chevron's Rangely H<sub>2</sub>S Operations Plan and Public Protection Plan 2017 identified that all of the wells near the proposed open areas have relatively low concentrations of H<sub>2</sub>S at the 100 foot and 500 foot exposure radiuses. Based on the implementation actions under the alternatives it is unlikely that any of the alternatives would increase the overall public safety issues associated with H<sub>2</sub>S in the Rangely oil field beyond those that exist under a dispersed use of roads and trails currently being observed within the area.

**3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.**

See #8 below for information about cultural resources.

**4. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.**

There are no highly controversial effects on the environment anticipated.

**5. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk.**

There are no effects that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk. Sufficient information is available in the environmental assessment and other past actions of a similar nature to understand potential effects.

**6. Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.**

The proposed changes to the 1997 RMP's travel management decisions would not set a precedent for future actions. These types of decisions are part of the BLM's land use planning process and are expected to be included in all land use plans.

**7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.**

No cumulative impacts related to other actions that would have a significant adverse impacts were identified or are anticipated.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.**

Alternative D proposes for the North Dinosaur open area to be in between Alternatives B and C in terms of size and avoids some of the more sensitive resources. Alternative D allows for vehicles to pull off one vehicle length (assumed to be 15 feet) from the road for safety; therefore, fewer cultural and paleontological resources are likely to be physically impacted by the driving corridor than in Alternatives A and C.

All alternatives have the potential to impact cultural resources. The BLM is currently developing a Programmatic Agreement with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Officer, Tribes, and other Consulting Parties to meet its obligations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Programmatic Agreement would provide guidance on how to identify, evaluate, and resolve adverse effects to cultural resources as a result not only of any area designations made in this planning effort but also in subsequent travel management plans (e.g., route designations and route maintenance).

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.**

Reintroduced ferrets and their offspring in northwestern Colorado are designated as a nonessential experimental population. Alternative D would reduce impacts to ferrets compared to current management. Under Alternative D, approximately eight percent of the Wolf Creek Management Area (WCMA) would be closed to year-round motorized/mechanized vehicle travel. Should Alternative D be implemented and a 1.5 mi/mi<sup>2</sup> route density prescription be applied to the ferret management areas, the overall route densities in Wolf Creek and Coyote Basin Ferret Management areas would decrease by 21 and 44 percent, respectively.

The Proposed Action would have little influence on Canada lynx (threatened species). Approximately 2,500 acres of potential lynx habitat are managed by the BLM WRFO, compared to the average home range in Colorado of more than 100,000 acres. Based on observations of dispersing lynx, individuals may occur occasionally in the Planning Area, but there is little suitable denning or winter habitat on the largely diminutive and widely separated parcels of BLM land east of State Highway 13.

The two federally threatened plant species are Dudley Bluffs bladderpod (*Physaria congesta*) and Dudley Bluffs twinpod (*Physaria obcordata*). Alternative D allows for vehicles to pull off of designated routes to safely park, but does not allow for travel off of designated routes for

activities such as post-pole collection, Christmas tree collections, dispersed camping, or fire wood collection or other such activities. This alternative provides the greatest protection for plant populations adjacent to designated routes by reducing the chance of inadvertent travel across plants.

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

None of the alternatives would violate any laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.